Conclusion
What Is Prefigurative Democracy?

The concept of 'prefiguration' or 'prefigurative politics' has a complex and diverse history. As a term, it has been employed in a variety of contexts since the 1970s and thus has acquired a range of different uses and meanings over time. However, it refers to a particular logic of social and political change that has informed, or even shaped, various radical tendencies and practices since the nineteenth century. In the wake of recent 'occupy movements' such as Occupy Wall Street (OWS), the Spanish 15-M movement, Nuit Debout or the Gezi Park protests this concept has received increased attention in academic debates. But it often remains unclear what 'prefiguration' exactly is. Some take it to be a revolutionary strategy that is employed in the pursuit of radical change. Others see it as a way to experience political liberation within their everyday lives and environment. My aim is to conceptualise prefigurative democracy as an attempt to change the political institution of society. This yields an understanding of the radical potential of protest and social movements today. In the remaining pages, let me summarise my theory of prefigurative democracy in five theses.

1: Prefigurative Democracy Is Neither Revolutionary Nor Reformist

The purpose of prefigurative democracy is to politically re-institute society – and to do this now, not merely in a distant future. In this sense, it poses an alternative to both reform and revolution as traditional conceptions of radical change. Prefigurative democracy derives from the originally anarchist conception of prefiguration to some degree, and breaks with it in a number of other respects.

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On the one hand, it aligns with the anarchist notion insofar as it maintains that meaningful change can and must be realised in the 'here and now' – and not merely in a distant future. But on the other hand, the anarchist idea of prefiguration as a process of 'building a new society in the shell of the old' no longer applies in a discussion of contemporary social movements. The image of a 'new society' – which, like a sterile embryo, gradually grows in the womb of the 'old' one – evinces the implicit ideal of an organic or post-political society that is essentially devoid of social conflict or antagonism. Even if this is perceived as the ultimate aim rather than a feasible objective of prefigurative democracy, the ideal of a post-political society detracts from its true radical potential.

More importantly, the ultimate aim of a post-political society is not only unattainable but also undesirable. It is here that radical-democratic theory offers an important insight, which is often referred to as the 'autonomy of the political'. This means that the social is always and inevitably politically instituted (Marchart 2007: 48). There is no such thing as a 'society' that ontologically precedes, or exists in isolation of, its political institutions or procedures. Of course, political conflict may be understood to have its proper or legitimate place within a distinctively political sphere. But the ability to imagine such a political sphere already presupposes a particular shared understanding of who or what a well-ordered 'society' is, and what kind of institutions or procedures it deems legitimate to begin with. To put it in the words of Claude Lefort, our 'very notion of society already contains within it a reference to its political definition' (1988b: 217). This definition can be given in a myriad of different ways and from a variety of perspectives. It thus follows that the meaning and structure of 'society' will always and inevitably be subject to political conflict and contestation. Consequently, the ideal of a post-political society is essentially anti-democratic, since any attempt to establish a society devoid of conflict or division will render such political differences invisible. This is one of the key insights of radical democracy as a theoretical tendency: that our understanding of 'society' is politically constituted – and that, in a pluralistic society, its meaning thus will always be subject to political debate, revision and rearticulation. The task of democratic institutions or procedures is precisely to accommodate and stage such a pluralistic and continuous debate.

It is for this reason that I have proposed an alternative, radical-democratic conception of prefiguration. If society is always already

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politically constituted, then it is primarily at the level of its political form or institutions that change must be pursued. Rather than an attempt to foreshadow an organic or harmonious society in the here and now, prefigurative democracy is a way to experimentally change its political institution. Critics may argue that by insisting on the autonomy of the political, I risk neglecting the social or economic implications and potentials of prefigurative democracy. Most prefigurative movements tend to be strongly anti-capitalist: they not only seek political or institutional change, but also aim to restructure social relations at an economic level. Indeed, prefigurative experimentation often takes place at the most everyday level of social and economic life. The purpose of prefigurative democracy is precisely to politicise social relations or contexts that were hitherto not perceived as legitimately political. As Arendt has argued in the context of revolutionary councils, such radical forms of participatory democracy can emerge in any 'accidental proximity' (2006a: 259). The point, therefore, is not to deny that social and economic relations will often be at stake in prefigurative democracy – and that, in consequence, prefigurative democracy must indeed be anti-capitalist. But this entails challenging the supposedly a-political nature of these social and economic relations, which starts by questioning the (often invisible and implicit) way in which they are politically instituted, and by proposing a different form in which they can be organised.

One may nevertheless ask if, by conceptualising prefiguration from a radical-democratic perspective, I have not effectively given up on its revolutionary aspirations? After all, what is the point of pursuing radical change if it is not at least informed by the ultimate goal of a just society that is devoid of any social division or conflict? Indeed, prefigurative democracy is not revolutionary in the traditional sense. Its success or failure also does not depend on its ability to establish complete and definitive systemic change in the long term or to change society in its every aspect. Prefigurative democracy may as well occur on a smaller scale or temporary basis, and nevertheless be of great significance to its participants (and thus continue to hold a promise for the future). What is more, many participants in recent prefigurative movements (such as OWS and 15-M) were rather ambivalent about their revolutionary inclinations (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 80). Although most of them sought radical change, they did not necessarily dismiss representative democracy per se – or even all of its existing procedures and institutions. At the same time, prefigurative democracy clearly is also not reformist, if this

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means that social and political change must be piecemeal, gradual, and based on the implementation of a predefined model or plan. And it is certainly a radical form of politics in that it intervenes in society's institution at the most fundamental level. It questions and seeks to reconstitute its political form (*mise en forme*), staging (*mise en scène*) and meaning (*mise en sens*).

2: Prefigurative Democracy Is Both Formal and Substantive

Although it is often suggested that prefigurative politics implies an equivalence of (or full consistency between) means and ends, I assert that prefigurative democracy is a radically open-ended practice. In fact, it is underpinned by a critique of instrumentalism and the very logic of means and ends in politics. Rather than the pursuit of a clearly defined and distant end, prefigurative democracy has a distinctively *experimental* form, in that the rearticulation of its abstract goals is continuously at stake in prefigurative democracy itself. It also has an important *experiential* value, in that it entails the immediate experience of freedom in practice. It thus appears that those engaged in a prefigurative movement or practice often seek to maintain their practices as long as possible – rather than to bring it to a close. A good illustration of this is the attempt of various occupy movements to set up durable networks of neighbourhood councils or local assemblies after their occupy camps had been evacuated (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 120; Roos 2013; Sánchez 2012).

This gives rise to the question if prefigurative democracy may acquire a more durable institutional form, whilst retaining precisely its radical open-endedness. Many recent occupy movements typically employed the public assembly as its most important body of collective decision-making. Although the assembly clearly has a number of important prefigurative features, it also tends to have a temporary and fleeting character. Butler (2015: 75) describes the assembly as an 'anarchist moment' or 'anarchist passage' that only briefly emerges to make an intervention in the political status quo. Is there a specific institutional form that may accommodate prefigurative democracy in the long term? Following Arendt, we have seen that the council – or, to be more precise, a federated system of democratic councils in various forms and capacities – best serves to reconcile the open-ended nature of prefigurative democracy with the need to give it a durable institutional form. More than any other form of

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government, council democracy is subject to constant augmentation and rearticulation. In fact, radical self-reform may well be considered the primary political matter at stake in any institutionalised form of prefigurative democracy.

This also leads us to ask whether prefigurative democracy pertains to a formal view of social movement strategy and organisation, or to a more substantive idea of democracy. In most theoretical accounts prefiguration is first and foremost understood to prescribe a particular formal relation between the means and ends, or the present and the future, in activist practices. For others, however, it rather connotes direct-democratic or consensus-oriented decision-making, horizontal and decentralised organisational structures, or an attempt to immediately establish greater gender and racial equality within one's social movement or everyday life. It is also often associated with attempts to establish alternative economic structures and relations of property. However, I assert that there is a more immediate connection between the institutional or organisational form of prefigurative democracy on the one hand, and the substantive ideal of democracy that is implied in it, on the other. Its preference for participatory decision-making and decentralised organisation clearly corresponds with its experimental and open-ended character. If prefigurative democracy typically seeks its own continuation, rather than pursuing a predefined end, then it arguably requires a durable institutional form that is always open to alteration and reconstitution. Whereas there is a constant – and, to some degree, irresolvable – tension between political action and its institutionalisation, this tension at the same time manifests a close interconnection between the form and content of prefigurative democracy. Much like a conceptual distinction between means and ends, which is often projected on political practices from an external and abstract point of view, form and content may not be as easily distinguishable as political theorists often seem to assume.

3: Prefigurative Democracy Is Horizontal as Well as Vertical

The slogans and prefigurative practices of recent occupy movements have been widely understood to celebrate participatory democracy and manifest a principled rejection of political representation in its every kind. Many of these movements indeed were rather critical of

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electoral-representative democracy in its current state. At the same time, as is evinced by slogans such as 'We are the 99%', these practices have never been entirely devoid of representative claims. I argue that contemporary social movements are prefigurative not *in spite of* their representative role, but precisely *by virtue of* these aspects. Whereas prefigurative democracy often entails experimentation with participatory or horizontal forms of organisation and decision-making, such practices also symbolically 'stand for' something or someone that exceeds them. Rather than a dismissal of political representation per se, prefigurative democracy thus presupposes a very specific form of representation, which is not based on a formal mandate and thus does not limit citizens in their ability to take the initiative and participate in democratic politics. Laclau suggests that political representation typically has a synecdochal form, in which the whole is represented by one of its constitutive parts. This form of the *pars pro toto* may indeed be recognised in various aspects of recent occupy movements: the way they articulated representative claims (such as 'We are the 99%'), their laying claim to public space and its reappropriation as a commons, and their experiments with more horizontal and participatory forms of organisation.

This means that neither a purely participatory view of democracy nor a theory that largely equates political action with representation can offer a sufficient basis for our understanding of prefigurative democracy. The experiences of the past decade urge us to include both perspectives in our analysis of prefigurative movements and practices. As we saw in the introductory chapter, prefigurative politics was originally associated with a relatively limited range of radical or revolutionary social movements on the Left. It might be an exaggeration to state that today, with the emergence of the politically more diverse occupy movements, prefiguration has entered the mainstream of contentious politics. But it clearly has come to play a much more important role in the repertoire and rhetoric of contemporary social movements. At the same time, many of these movements no longer fit into the binary opposition between participatory democracy or 'horizontalism' on the one hand, and representative democracy or 'verticalism' on the other (Nunes 2021; Süß 2021). If we are to make sense of recent developments, it thus is necessary to reconcile these various strands of the radical-democratic tradition. A theory of 'prefigurative democracy' that combines key insights of these various tendencies can help us to acquire a better

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understanding of these movements and their democratic relevance and potential today.

Of course, such combinations between participatory and representative forms of democracy may take very different shapes and directions. One way would be to create new representative institutions, alongside the liberal-democratic state (Teivainen 2016: 31–3). As we saw in Chapter 3, this is precisely what some recent occupy movements set out to do. The public assemblies, neighbourhood councils and networks of local 'communes' that continue to emerge in various places around the world offer a space for democratic participation and collective deliberation. At the same time, these alternative institutions of participatory democracy also fulfil an important representative role. They symbolically 'stand for' – and, in consequence, give rise to – a broader constituency or support base.

4: Prefigurative Democracy Is In, Against, Beyond and In Engagement With the State

By challenging this binary opposition between horizontalism and verticalism, my conception of prefigurative democracy arguably also opens up new avenues for rethinking its relation with the liberal-democratic state and its electoral-representative institutions. Prefiguration is traditionally understood as 'the ideal strategy for the construction of an alternative world without engaging with the state or other powers that be' (Maeckelbergh 2009: 95). But even if its ultimate goal is to radically change the political form of society – in other words: even if it deliberately seeks to oppose or reach beyond liberal democracy as we know it today – it remains questionable if it is always desirable, or even feasible, for a prefigurative movement or practice to eschew any engagement with established electoral-representative governments (at a local or national level).

There are a number of reasons to suggest that prefigurative democracy may not always be incompatible with a more strategic approach at various levels of the state. For one, by refusing to engage with such platforms, activists and social movements arguably deny themselves a valuable opportunity to use them for their own purposes. Rather than a cohesive set of institutions and procedures that all serve a common purpose, the modern liberal-democratic state may as well be understood as a more 'complex set of relations, dynamic and traversed by contradictions' (Mouffe 2013: 119). There may often be a

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potential to exploit the many tensions, conflicts and differences that exist between its various levels of governance and decision-making. Why should one not try to 'use the state, to secure new universal rights . . . of the type that have been prefigured in the occupied squares of 2011?' (Gerbaudo 2013). Perhaps the most important question, then, is not how any form of contact or engagement with the state may be avoided, but instead how a prefigurative movement could explore these possibilities whilst retaining its radical-democratic, experimental and open-ended character.

One evident objection to engagement with the liberal-democratic state is that such an approach would not be consistent with the aim of establishing a more participatory form of democracy – in short, that it would not be prefigurative. This is indeed how prefiguration has traditionally been defined: as an attempt to establish a perfect consistency between the means and ends of one's political practice. However, as we saw in Chapter 2, it may be impossible to maintain consistency as one of the defining features of prefigurative democracy. Many recent prefigurative movements or practices do not appear to have had a clearly defined end in the first place. The criterion of consistency between means and ends arguably also feeds into a rather puritan and self-limiting understanding of social movement politics. This is also implied in the idea that a 'new society' can and must be 'built within the shell of the old'. To what extent is it at all possible to create a sterile, embryonic new society in a time when the modern state has permeated nearly every aspect of our social and everyday life?

For these reasons, and notwithstanding their previous critique of electoral-representative government, some activists and social movements have indeed continued to pursue an electoral strategy, after their prefigurative experiments in occupied public spaces had come to an end (Flesher Fominaya 2020: 304; Tormey 2015: 113). Probably the most prominent example is the Spanish left-populist party Podemos, which emerged in the aftermath of the 15-M movement and initially had considerable success in national and European elections (Errejón and Mouffe 2016: 70–1). For its founder and former leader Pablo Iglesias, the turn to an electoral strategy was simply a logical next step (Iglesias 2015: 11–15). For others, it was arguably a much more unexpected and innovative turn towards a different political repertoire. In the Spanish city of Castellón de la Plana, for example, 15-M activists have taken part in the formation of a new public platform named Castelló en Moviment, which ran in

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the local elections of 2014 (Ordóñez et al. 2017). Their aim was to 'change traditional mechanisms of political intermediation to create channels of citizen participation and thus transform local government into a radical, direct municipalist structure' (Ordóñez et al. 2017: 10). Several political parties, some of which emerged from the occupy movements of the past decade, have sought to integrate online forms of participatory decision-making within a more vertical party structure. By establishing digital voting mechanisms and online platforms, they hoped to take advantage of the renewed enthusiasm for participatory democracy that the occupy movements had aroused (Gerbaudo 2019: 35–6).

It remains to be seen how, or to what extent, engagement with electoral-representative institutions and procedures can be made compatible with basic principles and aspirations of prefigurative democracy. There obviously is a danger of co-optation: not least because these electoral-representative institutions are based on an entirely different conception of democracy. It may be difficult for a prefigurative movement to maintain its open-ended and spontaneous character, its horizontal and decentralised structure, and its constitutive and synecdochal representative function once it engages with the inegalitarian and restricted forms of representation that are implied in electoral-representative democracy. But these experiences suggest that prefigurative democracy may not necessarily preclude any form of engagement with some of the existing electoral-democratic institutions and procedures.

Another option for some prefigurative movements or practices may be to put pressure on the liberal-democratic state and its institutions from the outside. Prefigurative democracy thus can have an important 'counter-democratic' function – albeit, perhaps, in spite of itself. This conception of 'counter-democracy' is derived from the work of Pierre Rosanvallon, who defines it as 'a democracy of indirect powers disseminated throughout society – in other words, a durable democracy of distrust, which complements the episodic democracy of the usual electoral-representative system' (Rosanvallon 2008: 8). 'Counter-democracy' thus refers to a broad range of institutions and organisations, action groups and NGOs, parties, cooperatives, campaigns and other citizens' initiatives, which each serve different goals and functions. Whilst these various counter-democratic actors tend to have very different goals and purposes, seen from a distant point of view it may nevertheless be possible to ascribe a shared democratic role to them. They all serve to critically monitor and assess

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the policies and legislation of governments at various levels. And, if necessary, they often mobilise against it in an attempt to influence, frustrate or prevent the process of its implementation. A similar conception is developed by John Keane, who uses the term 'monitory democracy' to describe 'a host of non-party, extra-parliamentary, and often unelected bodies' that together serve to monitor and scrutinise 'all fields of social and political life' (Keane 2011: 216). In the age of digitisation, Keane argues, monitoring has become the most important form of democratic engagement for most citizens – much more, for instance, than voting.

These concepts of 'counter-democracy' and 'monitory democracy' originally serve a different purpose in that their aim is to understand the democratic role of protest and social movements *within* the liberal-democratic order. Prefigurative movements and practices often seek to imagine a radically different future *beyond* liberal democracy in its current electoral-representative state. But I nevertheless assert that these two concepts may still be fruitfully employed in the context of prefigurative democracy. Even if they do not manage to establish radical change in the long term, prefigurative movements may still serve to give a democratic impulse to electoral-representative governments – or at least force them to live up to their own democratic pretensions. This conception of 'counter-democracy' may thus be used to understand how prefigurative movements or practices serve to democratise electoral-representative democracy, even though their original intention (and their eventual potential) may at the same time be much more radical. It helps one to obtain a more nuanced or complex understanding of how prefigurative democracy can relate to the state at its various governmental and political levels.

5: Prefigurative Democracy Is Only the Beginning

Finally, this gives rise to the question of what remains after prefigurative practices have come to an end. As argued in Chapter 2, prefigurative democracy often seeks its own continuation and thus does not pursue a predefined end. At the same time, and as is illustrated by the experiences of recent occupy movements, it often does eventually come to a close: the occupied square or squat gets evacuated, protesters are sent home or even arrested and detained, movements gradually disintegrate or lose momentum. Does this mean that prefigurative democracy is only meaningful while it lasts? Or is there a

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way to imagine how prefigurative democracy may retain some of its relevance or significance, long after its moment has passed and the protesters have gone?

There are at least two ways in which prefigurative experiences from the past continue to hold radical potential in the present as well as the future. As Laclau argues, first, radical change requires that 'the social' – the seemingly 'objective' or 'neutral' understanding of society that has sedimented in our shared discourse and social reality – be rearticulated and reinscribed with a different meaning and content. Change may thus gradually occur after our established idea of society has been disrupted through a political intervention. The recent experiences of occupy movements serve to illustrate this. Although the activist tent camps in Zuccotti Park and Puerta del Sol have indeed disappeared, these movements did eventually contribute to a new political discourse in which economic inequality and class distinctions have come to play a more central role. The relative success of politicians such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, parties such as Podemos, and movements such as Black Lives Matter arguably would not have been imaginable without these occupy movements.

But even if prefigurative practices may not lead to such significant, re-sedimentations in our dominant political discourse, they nevertheless continue to hold promise for the future. This brings us to a second perspective on the lasting impact of prefigurative democracy. Arendt shows how experiences and memories from the past may continue to lead a subterraneous life. They gradually acquire a new form and content, but precisely in doing so preserve some of this past experience. Such 'crystalline formations', as she calls them, may sooner or later be rediscovered and returned to the surface, where they continue to inspire or motivate new generations. Any moment of prefiguration (no matter how long it lasts) must eventually be accompanied by a process of refiguration, during which it is inscribed with new meaning. Prefigurative practices and movements thus cannot simply be assessed by means of their immediate outcomes. Nor can they evidently be appreciated as either a 'success' or a 'failure' (Van de Sande 2013). They instead retain their political relevance or potential for the future, long after their momentum has passed.

In short, prefigurative democracy is always only the beginning. As is already implied in the very word 'prefiguration', it can never be complete. It would thus be impossible to give a definitive account

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or a comprehensive definition of what prefigurative democracy essentially *is* or what it *should* be. It can have a variety of different outcomes and its effects may be wide-ranging. The various occupy movements that have emerged in the course of the past decade were only the most recent chapter in a long history of prefigurative politics. They have significantly contributed to its popularisation, and given new use and meaning to this idea of radical, political change. Prefiguration is likely to acquire many new forms, applications and articulations in the future. In that respect, prefigurative democracy inevitably is also prefigurative of itself.

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